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Educational Writings

REVIEWS AND BOOK NOTES

The scientific study of learning.—A great many experiments have been performed in recent years in laboratories for the study of general psychology and educational psychology for the investigation of the process of learning, that is, the improvement of the ability to perform some act through practice. From such experiments there has been developed a considerable body of conclusions, many of which have a bearing on educational procedure. The aim of a recent book¹ is to summarize all this work and to show its bearing on education.

The book begins in a somewhat abstract way by discussing the nature of learning in general. To simplify the matter, all kinds of learning are classified under two heads, the formation of habits and the acquisition of knowledge. The physiology of both types of learning is briefly described as the establishment of preferential routes, and learning is described, in general, as connecting. It seems to the writer better either to treat all learning as fundamentally representing the same process, as suggested by the last statement, or to distinguish a larger number of types. Knowledge is made to cover types of learning which do not well belong under it, such as reasoning.

The presentation of the factual material begins with the discussion of the learning curve, in connection with which the form of the curve, its variations, limits, and causes are described. This discussion is rather brief, which perhaps accounts for the fact that the chief explanation of the form of Swift's learning curve in ball-tossing is not mentioned—the explanation being that the amount of practice in successive learning periods increases enormously. Brevity perhaps also accounts for the easy dismissal of Bryan and Harter's explanation of plateaus in the learning curve.

Chapters follow on the distribution of practice time and on general factors in improvement, such as attention, attitude, and incentives. An additional chapter, entitled "Special Factors," discusses drill in the schoolroom. Under the title "Ideational Learning" the author discusses a number of matters which he classifies under acquiring knowledge. This discussion is taken up largely with the definition, classification, and theoretical interpretation of the various particular kinds of learning which are brought under this head.

¹ WILLIAM HENRY PYLE, *The Psychology of Learning*. Baltimore: Warwick & York, 1921. Pp. 308.

This account will give some notion of the way the book is organized. There is an alternation between accounts of the results of experiments and theoretical discussions. Other topics which are discussed are memory and memorizing, the correlation between learning abilities, the methods of measuring capacity for learning, transfer of training, fatigue, the relation of instincts to learning, and the fundamentals of statistics.

In general, the parts of the book which summarize the experimental literature are the most satisfactory. These parts might have been amplified somewhat and made more systematic. For example, individual differences are treated in a chapter under the appropriate title and also in the chapter on "Measuring Learning Capacity." In the chapter on individual differences, again, data on differences in general capacity are presented without distinguishing them from differences in learning capacity. The mechanics of the book are also rather unsatisfactory. For instance, in many of the figures the numerals are so small as to be indistinguishable, and the scales are not adequately described.

In summary, the book serves a useful purpose as a fairly comprehensive and succinct account of the scientific studies of learning, but it suffers from lack of systematic, careful organization and clearness and concreteness in presentation.

FRANK N. FREEMAN

Defining the problems of a school unit.—The capacity of the American public school to adapt itself both to new conditions developing within the community it serves and to new conceptions of ideal and purpose in educational thought is becoming annually more apparent through accounts of successful experience with various types of reorganization or extension of its activities. Among the more delicate of the adjustments which a broadening aim in public education has required is the refashioning of curriculum, program, and administrative policy to fit the varying endowments and interests of an unsorted student population. This readjustment has been rendered the more difficult, moreover, by the fact that whatever treatment is found to be appropriate to the individual needs of the pupils with whose training the school is charged, must likewise be made to comport with the general community situation with respect to social and industrial opportunity, provision of facilities for teaching, and the legal or administrative limitations obtaining in any given unit of school control.

The details of organization and planning necessitated by the effort to make the school serve the best interests of the pupils enrolled, under the conditions existing in the community which maintains it, are well illustrated by an analysis¹ presented by the principal of an elementary-school unit in a large city school system.

¹ PHILIP ALBERT BOYER, *The Adjustment of a School to Individual and Community Needs*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1920. Pp. 141.